

# Need a Break from Brexit? Argue about something else...

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In recent months, Brexit has been all-consuming. This has certainly been true for us at the Centre for Brexit Studies, but it has also been true for Government – from the top echelons down. In recent months we've seen a draft Withdrawal Agreement published and then rejected not once or twice but three times. A Conservative Party vote of confidence in the Prime Minister late last year was followed by a vote of confidence in the Government early this one. Two Brexit deadlines have been and gone and we're still sat here in limbo.

The febrile Brexit atmosphere looks set to heat up again shortly in the run-up to European elections. Will May and Corbyn reach an agreement in time to avoid them? Certainly the Prime Minister is desperate to do so, in part because current polling doesn't look good for the Conservative Party ahead of either European elections or local ones. For precisely the same reason, Jeremy Corbyn faces no incentive to do a deal with the Government: Labour are likely to be the biggest winners from the current impasse.

All of us need a break from Brexit occasionally and so, channelling my inner Sideman, I thought I'd decide to avoid Brexit for the day. What better than to swap one controversy for another and talk about another topic that has garnered significant local<sup>[1][2]</sup> and national<sup>[3]</sup> media attention: HS2. The questions that need answering are the following:

1. What is it for?
  - a. Does it achieve these aims?
  - b. Can these aims be achieved more cost-effectively via any other means?
2. Is it an appropriate use of resources?
  - a. Is it necessary?
  - b. Does it deliver sufficient value-for-money?

### 3. What are the opportunity costs?

Often, the fast services offered by HS2 are juxtaposed with dire local rail services. I have a lot of sympathy with this, even though ultimately we shouldn't view them as either-or propositions but rather as complementary. As a regular user of the railway service in the West Midlands, I can attest that it is groaning under the strain, particularly during rush hour. Overcrowding on my commute is sometimes as uncomfortable as being on a rush hour tube service in London, only the trains arrive every 20 minutes instead of every 2.

What's worse, huge swathes of the West Midlands metropolitan area are not served by train at all, leaving busses and cars as the primary modes of transport. Whilst both have their place, the need for frequent stopping points renders the bus a slow mode of transport on many routes (not to mention the challenges of timetabling etc.) For all its vices (and they are legion), the car is often unbeatable as a point-to-point mode of transportation. There is a strong case for much greater investment in the local road network as well as its rail counterpart<sup>[4]</sup>.

How on earth does HS2 help with any of this? Fundamentally, HS2 is about taking stress off the existing rail network, specifically the West Coast Main Line and the Birmingham spur. Phase 1 of the project would only achieve this in a very limited way. Current high-speed traffic from Birmingham New Street and Birmingham Airport would be diverted from the existing network. That helps Birmingham commuters because it frees up space on the existing high speed line between Birmingham and Coventry to run more local services.

The line north of Birmingham, however, will only see the benefits once phase 2 is constructed. This will allow the existing West Coast Main Line and Birmingham spur to be used for more local traffic and freight. The scope for improving services is significant. Although the need for more capacity on the West Coast Main Line has been challenged by some, there is certainly little room for increased high-speed train frequency. To put this into some kind of context, Virgin Trains West Coast made an average of approximately 111,500 passenger journeys per day in the final quarter of last year. Obviously it includes a number of destinations (e.g. Lichfield) that won't be served by any HS2 service. It is, however, a near 25% uplift on the number made during the same period 5 years earlier.

In terms of achieving its aims – freeing up high speed capacity south of Manchester – it's clear that the entire project does achieve this to an extent. However, there is a great deal of high-speed traffic currently served by existing services that won't easily be rerouted. Travellers from the city of Lichfield to London will presumably continue to use the existing high-speed service on the West Coast Main Line. The same will undoubtedly be true of others around Tamworth, Nuneaton, and Coventry. North-West Birmingham (e.g. Sutton Coldfield) might well find that using the existing Lichfield services are faster than travelling to central Birmingham and walking to Curzon Street.

Likewise, existing high speed services in the Black Country, most notably Wolverhampton, will presumably continue to use the existing route for high speed services into London. Collectively, these areas serve a large population and any action that reduces their access to high-speed rail services will not be popular, even if it improves local rail links.

The additional £43bn (ish) quoted from Sir John Armitt is for additional "local transport infrastructure" to maximise the benefits. I believe that most of this is unlikely to be built (which would be socially wasteful, but underinvestment in the strategic transport network is hardly new).

The Government states that over 300,000 passengers are expected to travel daily on HS2. This is very large compared to existing demand and compared to the overall size of the regional Labour market. However, such comparisons are not quite realistic – firstly, passengers in rail terms tends to imply "passenger journeys", which treats a return trip as two passenger journeys. As such, I make 2 passenger journeys when I commute rather than one. Any change in train also counts as a new passenger journey, even if covered by a single ticket.

Secondly, this applies to the entire proposed HS2 network – not just phase 1. It would thus include services running on both HS2 and non-HS2 track. Your journey from Birmingham to Glasgow would thus be counted, even though the HS2 portion of the journey is relatively short (Birmingham-Manchester). I don't think it's unrealistic to expect a certain number of London commuters to move out to "the provinces" to take advantage of lower house prices if ticket prices are low

enough. That being said, Government figures might charitably be labelled 'optimistic'.

The Government would counter that it needs sufficient capacity to "future proof" the service – if this line is to be sufficient for 50 years hence then it needs excess capacity now. As such, it is legitimate to argue that HS2 is a costly way to add capacity, although the onus is on those that do so to demonstrate a cheaper way of achieving the same ends. Additionally, it is certainly true that phase 1 is much too short to make a big difference: the game changer would be a high speed service running non-stop to Glasgow/Edinburgh.

A straight 320km/hr service (standard high-speed on the continent) would give a 2hr London-Glasgow service. The speed gains on the Birmingham to London route are incremental in comparison and in part are due to the absence of stopping plus the absence of slower trains. The fastest existing Brum-London service takes 73 minutes and I believe that a theoretical time of just under 70 minutes is possible with modest upgrades (although insufficient capacity exists on the line to deliver such a service through the day). For comparison, a standard fast (Virgin Trains) service takes around 84 minutes. I include these calculations merely to illustrate the gains of a faster line versus the existing tech.

HS2 will also deliver a step change in airport access via the rail network. Journey times from Birmingham to Manchester Airport will be significantly cut, as will those from London to Birmingham Airport. As ever, the problem lies in the overwhelming majority of people who live in the suburbs. Being able to travel from Birmingham to Manchester Airport in 32 minutes is wonderful. However, if you live in a suburb (per 90% of the population), you can add at least 30 minutes to get to Birmingham City Centre in the first place. As for the million people who happen to live in the Black Country, I suspect that for many driving to Manchester Airport will still be the fastest way to make that journey overall. The net result will be less of a step change in connectivity than raw figures would suggest.

[1] <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/transport/2019/04/19/hs2-could-end-up-costing-more-than-156-billion/>

[2] <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/transport/2019/03/22/fresh-calls-to-axe-hs2-over-pollution-fears/>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/07/hs2-the-zombie-train-that-refuses-to-die>

[4] I have not mentioned cycling as a potential mode of transport. There are several good reasons for this – the absence of safe cycle infrastructure is key, alternative transport arrangements are necessary given that winter conditions are often inclement/treacherous, cycling is not really viable as a sole mode of transport over longer distances and few offices have sufficient changing and storage facilities to accommodate cyclists.